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Tillerson Returns to Texas, Revives Commitment to American Values

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After one full year of service, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson remarked how things have come “full circle” as he began his address by recounting his time as a student at the University of Texas at Austin on Thursday. Ironically, “full circle” also foreshadowed a remarkable return to orthodoxy as his speech heavily relied on values--such as democracy and human rights--that are often neglected by this administration.

Tillerson went through the motions of his address in a standard three-pronged approach to American interests in Latin America, discussing prosperity, security, and liberty. The first couple of topics were largely intertwined; Tillerson aptly noted that security issues are often contingent on economic conditions and supporting development is fundamental to dealing with national security interests, namely those of “transnational criminal organizations.” Tillerson, an engineer by training and a former titan of the energy sector, also spent a lengthy amount of time discussing the need for more extraction and movement of energy, especially natural gas, across North and South America. However, the tough-on-crime, nice-on-oil rhetoric was surprisingly short-lived, and Tillerson made a pivot to discuss shared values throughout the western hemisphere.

In what could have easily been mistaken for the idealistic talking points of former Secretary of State John Kerry, Tillerson focused his remarks on eliminating tyranny from the Americas. Engagement in the Western



human rights. From here, Tillerson dialed in on the regimes in Venezuela and Cuba and called for peaceful transitions to more open governments.

During a Q&A session after his remarks, Tillerson even seemed to suggest supporting a coup d'état in Venezuela. He alluded to the tendency of militaries to take over in dire situations and proceeded to suggest that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro might have “some friends over in Cuba that can give him a nice hacienda on the beach, and he can have a nice life over there.”

This may have been his most eyebrow-raising comment of the event. It is no secret that the United States would like to see Maduro out of power; however, such overtures can be risky and result in miscalculation. Feasibly, a coup could be launched and subsequently fail, leaving an even worse situation. A similar situation transpired when George H. W. Bush voiced support for a revolt against Saddam Hussein after the 1991 Gulf War. When Iraqis did revolt, no American help ever came, and the uprising was brutally crushed. Tillerson's rhetoric is not quite as extreme, but the words of the Secretary of State still hold considerable weight.

Tillerson also targeted Cuba in the process. Tillerson noted that the Castro regime is expecting to transfer power sometime this year and affirmed that the United States would help the Cuban people use this transition to achieve the freedom they yearn for. Tillerson also defended previous actions to re-apply sanctions against Cuba, describing the administration's intent to avoid transactions with the military or government while allowing for private commerce with Cuban civilians.

Either way, comments on both Venezuela and Cuba presented a noticeable divergence from the administration's “America First” promises. An American-instigated military coup in Venezuela is exactly the sort of adventurism that Trump and his foreign policy circle denounced both before and after the 2016 election. What's changed? It is possible that the State Department has since realized that pursuing economic and security interests pragmatically without actively promoting American values is detrimental to the global image of the United States. It is also possible that the so-called departure from values-based foreign policy was over-exaggerated from the start. Either way, the idealism of Tillerson's Thursday address is miles away from the expectations set by foreign policy elites as well as Trump's own administration.

After exactly one year of Rex Tillerson's tenure, American foreign policy has been consistently surprising and unconventional. Many expected Tillerson's tenure to be short and few would disagree that the past year has been tumultuous. Whether or not Tillerson will have a positive impact on the foreign policy of the United States remains to be seen. In the meantime, Tillerson must face an understaffed State Department and the hubris of America's Diplomat-in-Chief. The Secretary's remarks may not have been extraordinary, but the challenges that lie ahead certainly are.

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